

# THE MOVEABLE FEST

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## Interview: Natalie Zea on Finding Her Voice in "Sweet Talk"

When Terri Hanauer was looking for an actress with ability to look the part of a countess in 1930s Budapest, a WWII Viennese nurse, and a modern-day phone sex operator who could exude both the frustration and seductive charm in creating such fantasies for her clients, it wasn't long before Natalie Zea's name came up.

"When we met, I told her that as a director, I like to work with the actor to discover the layers of the character and find what's unpredictable and surprising," says Hanauer. "Natalie has a mystery to her that is a compelling and beautiful thing to watch."

Anyone with a quality cable TV or satellite plan may already know this since Zea has not only been one of the most exciting actresses to watch in recent years on shows such as "Justified," "The Following" and "Hung," but also one of the busiest. Usually taking characters that could easily be chalked up to a certain type on the page, Zea has a knack for making them unpredictable and often unexpectedly sophisticated, whether it was her work as one of the spoiled scions of the dysfunctional Darling family in "Dirty Sexy Money" or the high-maintenance ex-girlfriend of Hank Moody on "Californication."

Those qualities are both necessary for her turn in Hanauer's "Sweet Talk," an adaptation of Hanauer's husband Peter Lefcourt's play of the same name. A stirring two-hander that centers on a call between a writer (Jeffrey Vincent Parisse) trying to break

free of creative block and a self-described “fantasy facilitator” (Zea) who supplies him a much-needed dose of inspiration while trying to find some for her own life, the film offered Zea the opportunity to do what, in her words, was “All I’ve ever wanted to do — two people just sitting and talking.”

Of course, she and Parisse elevate that into something much more, transcending time and space in their conversation to allow both actors to show their considerable range, and shortly before the film’s release, Zea took the time to talk about dipping her toes into film and how it affected the choices she made as an actress, having a kinship with first-time feature director Hanauer and her plans to go into directing herself soon.



<https://web.archive.org/web/20131213045115/http://moveablefest.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/SweetTalkNatalieZea.jpg>)**This is a little different from your other roles in recent years since often you’ve played characters who have been at least partially defined by their relationship to someone else. Was it interesting to play someone with no such attachments?**

Yeah, I’ve had such a great run and I’ve been able to work with such ridiculously charismatic and brilliant leading men, but after awhile, every bird needs to step out of the nest. I’ve been actively seeking out roles where the character isn’t dependent on really anyone else to define her and this was the beginning of that journey.

I’m always very happy to get to play a character like that and there aren’t a lot of them out there. In 2013, we’re still searching for them. But they do exist and it was so great to work with a female director, too. Because we can say we’re all equal and that shouldn’t play a part in it, but it very much does. We had a short hand that I’ve never had with another director before. And it may or may not have been based on gender, but it certainly was not something to overlook.

Terri was so hands on as a director for Jeffrey and I, which is something that you don’t often get in television. Aside from directors who are also actors, who they tend

to be very hands on as well, she understood. She was so smart about understanding that this film lives and dies by the performances, and it doesn't matter if the lighting is great if we are not there and present. It was great to have us be a priority because it is so rare on set.

**Was it also unusual to work with a director whose husband Peter Lefcourt was the screenwriter?**

Peter was great, and I say he was great because I've been in situations where this hasn't been the case but he was not [on set] as often as one would think. He actually was great about leaving it alone and he would show up just to be supportive rather than to try and put his stamp on everything because I think he trusted the text and he obviously trusted his wife. That's what so great when you're in a romantic relationship with somebody who is also your creative working partner. If you do it right, you don't have to show up. You can let it go and trust that the other one knows exactly what your vision is, and I think that that's what they had.

**This may be a naïve question about acting, but did it make any difference in the way you make choices in your performance if you know the full arc of the character because it's a film as opposed to television where it's ongoing?**

It's not a naïve question at all, because for instance, Kevin Bacon is used to doing the opposite. He's always doing films and he's always got a closed-ended story that he can work off of and there isn't that mystery of, "Oh God, is this going to come back to bite me in the ass in six months?" That's significant. It's sort of the only way I know how to work. This is a luxury that I wasn't used to and it probably was more of a subconscious difference for me knowing that there is a full story. It has a beginning, middle and end, and I know exactly what all of those beats are. But it does make you feel a little more stable, like I'm making this choice very deliberately. I'm not just spitting in the wind and hoping that it is the right one.

**I liked the line your character says in about being a "fantasy facilitator" and while it wouldn't be accurate to draw a direct parallel between a phone sex operator and an actor, did you see a connection there? The conversations this character would have seem like they could be acting exercises.**

Yeah, it was important for me, and I actually didn't realize this consciously until we were pretty far into it, that I didn't want

her phone sex character to be a really good actress. When she answers the phone, I didn't want that character she puts on [to her customers] to be so compelling and so magnetic that it took you out of the movie because in actuality this girl's not a trained actress. She's just a girl who needed a job. She's pretty good at talking on the phone and she's sexual and outgoing enough to be like, "Okay, well, I'm gonna do this." But I didn't want her to be this shapeshifter or a failed actress or anything like that. I just wanted her to be this girl who answers the phone and she shifts her voice a little bit and she kind of puts on a little bit of an act, but for the most part, she's just going to work.



<https://web.archive.org/web/20131213045115/http://moveablefest.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/JeffreyVincentParisseSweetTalk.jpg> **Because you and Jeffrey were alone in your scenes where you were on the phone, I imagine you were shot separately but would you actually be talking to one another?**

The way it worked was we shot our coverage separately meaning the coverage that you see of Jeffrey is with me in a makeshift sound booth talking to him on the phone and the coverage that you see of me is him in the other room. I never saw his sound booth, which was weird. We were very separate from each other, which I think was intentional, during those scenes.

I think I actually got the advantage because I did my coverage after his. It was a great rehearsal because I got to learn my lines, but I knew how he was going to respond because we did it several times, and I still had that muscle memory when we shot my coverage. It was really lonely and I think [Jeffrey] felt this but not nearly as much as I did because he went second in the sound booth. You're just kind of sitting in this teeny, tiny, little, dark cave serving this thankless purpose — a lot of the crew didn't even know I was on set. Nobody really checks on you. That I found to be the most interesting part — the separation anxiety that went on during those phone calls.

**That would actually seem to play into the roles, no?**

Maybe. I just remember being able to do the reverse of the coverage in that apartment and just feeling so free.

**It must always be a surprise to see a final edit, but was it interesting here when it really must've felt like you were making two different films with the phone calls and the fantasy sequences?**

Oh yeah. This could have gone in a totally different direction and really been bad. But again my hat's off to Terri for knowing how to stitch this together and having the forethought. She's so meticulous and so smart, that I think she knew from the beginning exactly how this was all going to shake out. As an actor, you never have any control and I've been edited in such a way that has been shocking to me to see how different the scene ends up going. You have to trust. We held our breath and hoped for the best and I don't want to speak for Jeffrey, but I'm very, very, very happy with the outcome. I think it's even better than we had hoped.

**It sounds like you have an idea of what you want to do going forward. Does that include more films?**

Doing films, especially for a television actress, is always such a crapshoot and it's becoming increasingly more difficult to get films made just in general. I'm doing a film in February with Ron Livingston and Marcia Gay Harden and Vincent D'Onofrio in Chicago [called "Supreme Ruler"], which will be great. Then I'm producing my own film ["Imaginary Places Ease"], which has been in the works for years, and my television schedule has just fouled it up every time. We're shooting for the fall of 2014. At this point, you have to make your own.

**What is it about the idea that's made you hold onto it for a while?**

One of the problems is that it's so hard to pitch. [People ask], "Give me a one-liner?" I'm like, "Nope. Nope." It crosses all genres, which is another reason it's been incredibly difficult to get made and we have to make it ourselves because people are scared of it. But I wrote it and I actually just put my fiancé [Travis Schuldt]'s name on it because he has been such a huge contributor to the script. We did a major rewrite recently and we are going to direct it. It's just going to be very grassroots.

*"Sweet Talk" opens in Los Angeles at the [Downtown Independent \(https://web.archive.org/web/20131213045115/http://www.downtownindependent.com/events/sweet-talk\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20131213045115/http://www.downtownindependent.com/events/sweet-talk) on December 13<sup>th</sup> and will be available on demand, iTunes, Amazon, PlayStation on December 15<sup>th</sup>.*